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ABSTRACT

The VORHS Program (Vocational Opportunities for Rural Handicapped Students) was developed for a rural school district in Wyoming. It grew out of the need for a curricular system that could (1) provide the means of constructing individual courses to meet the needs of the handicapped population and also satisfy local graduation requirements; (2) provide a four-year curriculum to address prevocational skills and skill building through vocational training; (3) relate academic needs to a work situation; (4) extend the career opportunities offered through usual high school course offerings; and (5) identify and encourage the support of community resources to expand the instructional capabilities of the school staff. The model that was developed was adapted for use with handicapped students from the Experience Based Career Education program developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1975). The program is individualized and personalized, community based, emphasizes career development, and has a comprehensive integrated curriculum. Students have an individualized educational plan and take courses from the curriculum as needed. The schools provide two major instructional programs, VESEP I and II (Vocational Education, Special Education Project), through Central Michigan University in response to a state mandate for a written vocational education plan for handicapped students. The program has been successful in gaining community support and placement of students in community jobs and may be expanded to other districts in Wyoming in the future. (Author/KC)

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Vocational Opportunities For Rural Handicapped Students

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Abstract

The VORHS Program (Vocational Opportunities For Rural Handicapped Students) was developed through the area of special services for a rural school district in Wyoming. It grew out of the need for a curricular system which could: provide the means of constructing individual courses to meet the needs of the handicapped population and which also satisfied local graduation requirements; provide a four year curriculum to address pre-vocational skills and building through vocational training; demonstrate to the student his/her academic needs by relating to a work situation; extend the career opportunities offered through usual high school course offerings; identify and encourage the support of community resources to expand the instructional capabilities of the school staff.

This paper will present the inception and development of VORHS; major curricular components; community involvement and utilization of work sites; responsibilities assumed by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Need

In the early 1970's, school districts across the nation were becoming aware of the need and the mandate to provide special programming for handicapped students. At this time, due to the complexity of the undertaking, most educational agencies were focussing on the general education and related services requirements of their handicapped populations. Within a short period of time, as handicapped youth began to enter secondary programs, the need for career/vocational training became imminent.

The traditional career/vocational models were found unsuccessful for a large number of handicapped students due to the special requirements imposed by the handicapping conditions. Therefore, school districts began to develop programs which expanded on the traditional community based approaches and incorporated inter-agency efforts.

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It was recognized that cooperative and coordinated planning was a solution to the problem. However, it was this essential coordination which mounted barriers to effective career/vocational experiences for Wyoming handicapped youth and young adults. It was necessary for information and planning to flow in a continuous multi-lateral manner between all community resources. In some Wyoming school districts it is sometimes possible to have staff responsible for building these communication bridges and ensuring a continuous flow of interaction. Within the rural Wyoming school districts the situation was and is often different. Special education staff at the secondary levels are sometimes small, frequently one resource room teacher. Many districts cannot justify additional support personnel. Without training, planning and additional help the resource room teacher cannot effectively serve as classroom teacher, coordinator of community services, locator of exploration and job training sites; consultant to employers, work supervisors of special education students and curriculum developer.

Yet members of the business community and representatatives from community agencies tend to look to the educational system for leadership in any collaborative effort of this nature. In part, this is a natural outgrowth as these school aged students are primarily the responsibility of education; in part, this responsibility is delegated as in the requirement for the schools to develop individualized educational programs for handicapped students. When special educators and administrators cannot take this leadership role - for a variety of reasons - the community becomes discouraged and the career preparation of handicapped students suffers.

There have been several pieces of legislation which address career/vocational training for handicapped students, i.e., Rehabilitation Act of 1973; Vocational Education Amendment of 1976; Education of the Handicapped Act, P.L. 94-142. Since the passage of this legislation, many models have been developed and

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a considerable amount of research attempted. However, as Fardig, et al (1985) state, "The bulk of the research is concerned with postsecondary occupational adjustment of the mildly handicapped and has been conducted in urban areas." Little has been done in model development, personnel preparation or research to address the need of rural educators and communities in assisting their students through the transition from school to employment.

Many rural school districts in Wyoming were faced with multiple problems when attempting to meet federal and state mandates for appropriate vocational services to handicapped youth. Among these problems can be named small numbers of students requiring services; lack of staff expeertise and time; low incidence of severe handicaps, i.e., mental retardation, deaf, blind, deaf/blind, etc.; lack of an integrated curriculum which allows for an easy exchange between school, community work sites and service agencies. As a result of these and other problems, many handicapped students in Wyoming were not and are not receiving the pre-vocational and vocational training which would encourage them to become self-sufficient contributing members of our society.

These regretable situations are not a reflection of instruction being offered by school districts, of services being provided by community agencies or of interest in employment of the handicapped on the part of Wyoming employers. Rather, they are, in the opinion of this writer, an indication of the complexity of the problem. Much cooperation, planning, supervision and curriculum development must occur if our handicapped youth are to make the transition from school to work in a manner successful to employer and employee.

The model to be described grew out of the need for a curricular system which could: provide the means of constructing individual courses to meet the needs of the handicapped population and which also satisifed local graduation requirements; provide a four year curriculum to address pre-vocational skills and building through vocational training; demonstrate to the student his/her academic needs by relating to a work situation;extend the career opportunities offered through usual high school course offerings; identify

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and encourage the support of community resources to expand the instructional capabilities of the school staff.

Development of VOHRS Model

For several years there had been a close and effective working relationship between the school district and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation which resulted in some on-the-job experiences for handicapped students. However, it was clear that several important components were missing, i.e., a sequential approach to career/vocational education; better integration of course offerings with the general school curriculum; more effective on-job supervision of students; opportunities to relate work and academic skills; successful community involvement.

With these requisites in mind, several delivery models were investigated including the 'Experience Based Career Education' program (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1975). EBCE seemed to most nearly match the district's requirements for the following reasons. It is an individualized and personalized program, which is community based, emphasizes career development and has a comprehensive integrated curriculum. However, this program was not developed for a handicapped population; hence, modifications were needed.

The model that evolved contained these major components; community resources, which included community agencies; educational resources, which utilized the general education staff, special education staff and a special/vocational educator or resource consultant. To facilitate the integration of the community site into the educational process, several activities were undertaken. A steering committee was formed which was comprised of interested citizens and agency representatives. The function of this group was to advise, guide and evaluate the program. The community was canvassed for exploration and training sites and to identify those persons willing and qualified to come into the schools to assist in curriculum development and to serve as resources to students regarding

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occupational opportunities.

The major educational problem with the model was integration into an existing system. To effect this integration it was determined that the majority of programming would emanate from the special education resource room.The special educator was primarily responsible for developing placement options for the student but curriculum development was to be done in conjundtion with the resource consultant and the general education staff. This arrangement permitted flexibility in the student's scheduling to utilize regular classes, when appropriate, or specially designed classes as needed.

The VORHS program is built around a four year curriculum which addresses the following: pre-vocational/self awareness, 9th grade; limited in-house career exploration, 10th grade; expanded on-site exploration, 11th grade; vocational skill building, 12th grade. The identification of grade levels is not meant to be limiting but only to serve as a guide so that skills are presented in a sequential manner. The program has the flexibility to allow students to enter at any level regardless of academic standing. Students are encouraged to remain in regular classes as much as possible. However, when a student's individualized educational plan calls for modification within an academic area, the program offers some options. Individually designed courses can be developed and approved for credit with the cooperation of the content teacher and special educator. This basic four year curriculum contains classes which can comply as elective or required courses. And, finally, as the student reaches the junior or senior year, courses can be built around the community resources available for career development. The latter alternative provides an opportunity for students to relate interpersonal and academic skills to actual working conditions.

The educational opportunities needed for the successful implementation of such a curriculum are not possible without a

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great deal of planning and cooperation. The system must allow for daily planning with regular educators, the resource consultant and the employers, who playa major role in providing the practical work experience. The essence of the program is two fold: identify student deficits - academic, inter-personal or job skills - as these occur within an occupational setting; and to immediately implement a process of remediation. As the student reaches the job placement level, he/she is introduced to the services of agencies which will be able to continue service after graduation. By planning the student's programming in this manner, the student is assured a continuous flow of services within a familiar environment.

Implementation

As stated earlier in this paper, the provision of effective career/vocational development for handicapped students is a complex task. What makes it possible? In the instancae of this program several components were found essential to success: development of an appropriate individual educational plan (IEP); agency cooperation; community assistance; educational curriculum.

By federal, state and local regulation,all handicapped students are served under an IEP. The intent of this process is to insure that handicapped students are educated in the least restrictive environment and with instruction that considers individual strengths, weaknesses and potential. This, of course, is the first step in the VORHS program. As a result of the IEP development, it is possible to project long range goals and interests of the student and any need for course modifications. The IEP also provides for a tracking system to continually evaluate student gains and needs. Most frequently, one of these needs is to plan for gainful employment after the student leaves school, graduates or is no longer an educational responsibility.

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One procedure that works well is early agency involvement in the IEP implementation. Within the VORHS progam the procedure was very simple. Early in the student's junior year, the DVR counselor was invited to sit on the study committee assigned to the student. If, in the opinion of the counselor, the student's characteristics warranted further investigation of DVR eligibility and, if the student and parent/s desired affiliation with DVR, a formal referral to that agency was made from the school. Permission was obtained from the parent/s to exchange information between agencies. Assessment data gathered by the school could then be made available to DVR. Upon receipt of this data, a determination was made by the counselor for the need of any additional assessment. If the student met the eligibility requirements as a DVR client, the counselor became a permanent member of the staudy team. In this capacity, he/she assisted in programming and placement decisions and in the career/vocational development of the student. Upon graduation from high school, the student remained a DVR client thereby eliminating a break in services.

This shared responsibility process has been in effect for several years. Many benefits have been realized but most important are those related to the student. Since assessment results can be shared, the student is spared a duplication of this effort. By eliminating the break in services, the handicapped student is not required to adapt to new personnel involved in his/her case. Also, upon graduation, most students have some source of income as well as supervision and help in maintaining employment. Additionally, both agaencies benefit as a result of shared financial responsibility.

The important role of the community in guidance, assistance in curriculum development and provision of sites has already been presented. As a means of managing the data related to community sites for career awareness, observation, exploration and work experience, the CRIS (Community Resources Information System; Poole, 1986) was used. This permitted the recording and organization of data by employment opportunity, worker groups, resource persons, availability for field trips or of equipment/materials;

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work observation; work experience.

The primary responsibility of the educational system was for curriculum. Two major instructional programs, with modification, were employed. VESEP I and II (Vocational Education, Special Education Project I and II) was developed through Central Michigan University in response to a state mandate to provide a written vocational education plan for handicapped students. This program is used extensively in the rural Wyoming model.

VESEP I has as its purpose to provide a vocational/special education curriculum wich encourages cooperative teaching between the vocational staff and special education staff while addressing the vocational needs of handicapped students. VESEP II identifies pre-vocatioal skills necessary for success in the entry level tasks of VESEP I; offers programmatic suggestions for strengthening the prevocational skills; and provides a means of determining the vocational interests of the student. Both of these programs are detailed, thorough and comprehensive in scope. A report such as this does not do justice to the intricacies of the work; but rather only serves to offer the readear an overview.

VESEP II complements VESEP I by addressing two major areas: prevocational enabling skills and student occupational interest. The enablers are listed in ten behavioral areas: gross motor, fine motor, perceptual sensory, language arts, quantitative, comprehension, health and hygiene, personal/emotional, home responsibility and school responsibility. By matching the limitations or capabilities of handicapped students in the prevocational areas with the prerequisites of the occupational tasks, the educator's responsibility of guidance becomes more data based.

The student's occupational interest can be assessed by using the 'Interest Survey Scramble Board.' This piece of material is functional regardless of the handicapping condition sustained by the student. By combining the results of the interest survey and the enabling skills assessment, a student profile can be developed which can serve as an informal instrument for planning the student's individualized educational program.

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VESEP I is organized around eleven occupational clusters and subclusters. Relative to each of these clusters are three sets of tasks: employment tasks, which are generic to he work field; common cluster tasks which are commonly necessary for one to work within a job cluster; and, lastly, entry level tasks which are specific tasks within a sucluster. An illustration may provide clarity. Within the 'clothing/textile service' occupational cluster, four subclusters can be identified: clothing service, clothing constrauction, home furnishing and upholstery. Requisite to functioning within any of these occupational subclusters is skill in using the telephone. The generalization can be taken further in that the use of the telephone is globally required in the world of work. Therefore, this skill is identified as an 'employment task.' The ability to replace buttons, hooks and snaps is a skill needed across all four of the 'clothing/textile service' subclusters. Hence, it is known as a 'common cluster task.' The clothing construction subcluster includes two occupations, seamstress and alteeration tailor, as listed in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. Each of these occupations has specific requirements; i.e., a seamstress must be able to stitch hems and linings; an alteration tailor must be able to alter the waistline of trousers. Such specific tasks are known as 'entry level tasks.'

Instructional modules have been prepared for each identified task, be it an 'employment task,' a 'common cluster task' or an 'entry level task.' Each module has seven components: behavioral task knowledges/task skills; instructional methods; employment related competencies; instructional materials; language of the task; quantitative concepts; and suggestions. It is through the adaptation of these modules that the team teaching concept between the vocational and special educator becomes a reality.

In summary, theVESEP I and II offer the following plus much more.

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- Suggestions for planning and developing cooperative programs.
- Considerations for programming over all handicapping conditions.
- A listing of pre-vocational enabling skills and a system of identifying by entry level tasks those enablers that are essential.
- A means of gathering information related to student occupational interest.
- A listing of general employment related competencies and task related competencies.
- Identification of occupational tasks by occupational clusters or by entry level.
- Instructional modules for each task (employment, common cluster, or entry)
- A system for monitoring student progress.

The VESEP I and II provide a basis for a comprehensive awareness, exploration and skill building pre-vocational/vocational program for middle and high school level handicapped students. The special educator and the resource consultant bear the responsibility of coordinating the student's instruction within the school and work site.

Future

Within Wyoming, career education for the handicapped has become a priority issue. The Wyoming Handicapped Youth Transition Employment Project, a cooperative effort by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the State Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities has just completed it's first report entitled 'Futures At Risk.' (1986) Policy and service recommenda-

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tions have been made which include: delineation of roles and responsibilities of various agencies, development of transition plans for all handicapped youth, personnel preparation and coordinated planning.

In response to these recommendations, a proposal has been submitted to the State Department of Education to offer a state wide system of awareness, training and cooperative planning which would expand career/vocational opportunities for handicapped school age youth residing primarily in the rural communities of Wyoming (White, 1986).

The activities, as proposed, would assist up to five rural school distraicts and communities in the development of a collaborative transition model with the flexibility for adaptation to meet unique, local needs. At the conclusion of the project period, each of the participating districts/communities will have developed a plan of action for long range implementation of a special education/vocational education program. This will be accomplished through information gathering, information sharing, model development and on-site planning. The VORHS model will be offered as a reference.

The future projections of the project for the pilot participating districts/communities would include vocational training, site location and development, curriculum development and personnel preparation. Replication of the initial phase within other rural communities will be considered as funding becomes available.

Summary

It is rare when a program or process which has succeeded in one environment can be totally adopted into another. Such expectations are not held in regard to this discussion of VORHS. If some creative thoughts cana be stimulated and some encouraging comments afforded, the intended purpose will have been served.

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